

Reality Jam: the Uncanny Space of CCTV-based Video Art

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Closed circuit TV cameras have gained a certain ubiquity in the last few decades. In shopping malls, parking lots, housing estates, railways and airports they monitor the activities of an increasingly security conscious society. We have grown accustomed to their presence — while they ceaselessly monitor us, we hardly seem to notice them. Surveillance techniques like biometrics and new voyeuristic forms of media entertainment are more conspicuous. Yet since the beginning of video art in the 1960's artists have demonstrated sustained interest in ideas of surveillance. Bruce Nauman used CCTV cameras to transform the gallery into an uncanny space where the usual hierarchy of viewer and viewed is reversed. In *Live/Taped Video Corridor* (1969 – 70), for example, he placed two TV monitors one on top of the other at the end of a narrow passageway. Entering this confined space, the unsuspecting viewer is picked up by a camera mounted above the entrance. Drawn toward the monitors, the viewer sees a live image of herself walking down the passageway — but only from behind as if watched by someone else. As she approaches the monitors her image moves further away, frustrating the usual correspondence between vision and movement. This lends the work an ominous dream-like quality where things are familiar but also strange.

Like his contemporaries Dan Graham and Peter Campus, Bruce Nauman was drawn to the live video image as a way of exploring perceptual shifts — those involving subjectivity, space and time. In their work the past can exist simultaneously with the present, the image of the viewer is often doubled or repeated indefinitely, and space itself becomes a kind of maze or hall of mirrors. In Nauman's work in particular we catch ourselves “off-guard” as it were, as if we stood outside ourselves as just another image in the world, an alienated and perhaps unknowable entity. It is in this sense that Nauman's work participates in what Freud calls ‘the uncanny’. Freud identified the uncanny as a class of things in which something that has been repressed from conscious thought, something hidden and secret, returns to unsettle the subject. The live image we see in Nauman's work unsettles our customary sense of self-knowledge and

self-control. This image of ourself exhibits a certain indifference to our presence — it refuses to face us as a mirror image should. It is an image perhaps of our precarious mastery over ‘the self’ and over its technologically mediated double.

Today we generally accept that we in the West live in a media-saturated world — bombarded with images from television and advertising. As readers of images, we are accustomed to analysing their codes and conventions, their tactics and ploys. But are we sceptical enough? Harun Farocki¹ is a contemporary artist who makes films by compiling existing footage — surveillance images, training videos and industrial documentaries. His films however are not at all bland. Instead they show how images are used as a means of control. For example, in his film *I thought I was seeing convicts* (2000) we see pre-existing video recordings made in American prisons. Perhaps the most disturbing sequence shows surveillance camera footage of a fight breaking out in the exercise yard at Corcoran State Prison in California. At the first sign of a physical confrontation between two inmates the other prisoners drop to the ground covering their head with their hands. They know the guards will first call out a warning, fire rubber bullets and if the fight continues shoot real bullets. Positioned side-by-side, the camera shares its sightline with the gun used to shoot dead the targeted prisoner. This gives the image an especially oppressive character and implicates the viewer in the shooting. We even see a trail of gun smoke drift across the screen. Although these images are recorded automatically (there is no operator behind the camera) they are anything but innocent. Farocki's film highlights the link between vision and power — warring inmates are placed together in the exercise yard for the amusement of the prison guards. Here the camera not only records the scene but is also a crucial element in the guards' abusive power game.

My own work with CCTV cameras began in 2004 with a video installation called *The Mirrored Room*. In this work a live image of the gallery space is projected in stereoscopic 3D. Visitors are invited to don a pair of

anaglyph glasses (the type worn in 3D movies) and to interact with their own image. As the viewer moves away from the screen, with back towards the stereo cameras, their 3D image is projected onto the screen surface and into real space. When the viewer attempts to approach this phantom it retreats back into the screen — escaping into a virtual tunnel of images repeated in diminishing perspective. Like looking through binoculars, the 3D screen space is transformed in the manner of a stage set. Objects appear flattened — as if they existed as a series of separate 2D planes stacked one behind the other. The image the viewer sees of herself is also separated out from other elements in the scene — inducing a feeling of disconnectedness from other people and the surroundings.



The Mirrored Room by Margaret Seymour.
Image courtesy of the artist.

In 2005 I had the opportunity to make another work that creates an uncanny image of reality. *Dis/appear* was made during a creative residency at the Banff Art Centre where I had the help of a computer programmer.

In *Dis/appear* (2005) a live image of the exhibition space is processed in real time to incorporate a temporal delay. Time appears to stretch. Moving objects and people disappear from the image. Only things that are stationary are brought sharply into focus. The work was initially inspired by the aesthetics of early web cam video with its grainy images and halting motion caused by the low frame rate. What would normally be considered a deficiency, something that would improve with increased bandwidth, seemed to give visible form to the phenomenon of human memory — to the simultaneous stillness and transience of images we recall from the past. Installed in the public corridor of the studio building at the Banff Art Centre, the work both intrigued and troubled some of my fellow artists. Who was I watching? And why?

The surveillance camera is generally thought of as a straightforward device — one that simply shows whatever is in its field of view. In my work however, I am interested in the way surveillance technologies assume, or can in fact create, paranoia. While some people feel more secure in areas fitted with CCTV cameras, others feel the eye of Big Brother upon them. I am also interested in the way the surveillance image seems to anticipate a crime. Glimpsing your own image on a surveillance monitor can be a strangely disconcerting experience. Seen through the wide-angle lens it is easy to imagine yourself as the criminal. Video surveillance today presents us with an image of public anxiety — an uncanny image that transforms subjects into suspects.

1 For a more extensive discussion of Farocki's work see — Foster, Hal. 2004. "The Cinema of Harun Farocki", In *Artforum* 43 (3). New York, p. 156-62.